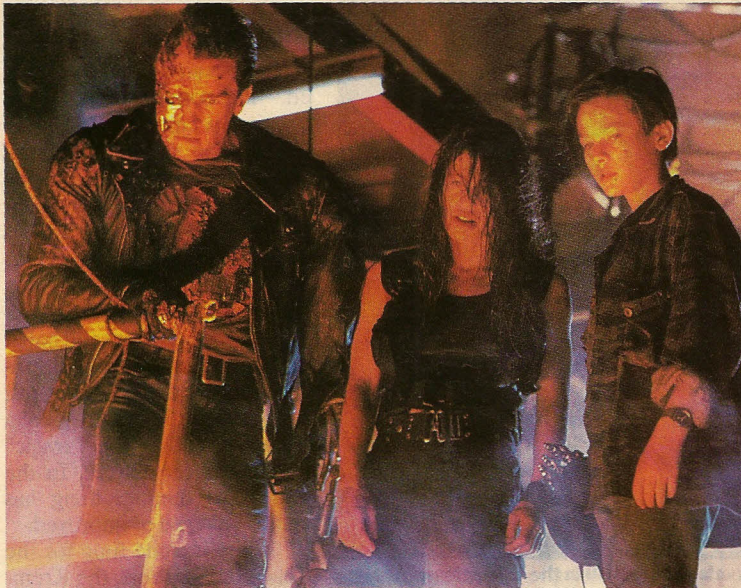


Half a Terrific Terminator

Sure, he can save the planet. But can he save megabudget action movies?



A holy family battles to save the world: Schwarzenegger, Hamilton, Furlong



A kinder, gentler cyborg: he only shoots off kneecaps

By **RICHARD CORLISS**

You are advised to wear "a sun block of 2,000" on Aug. 29, 1997. Otherwise you will be among the 3 billion people fried in a nuclear war triggered by some very smart, nasty computers. Lands will be leveled. Bodies will crumble like burned paper. Corrosive gales will surge across the earth. This ultimate special effect will come to pass... unless three little people—actually two little people and a big burly cyborg—can do some serious computer hacking.

That's the doomsday prospectus outlined in *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, James Cameron's sequel to his wonderfully reverberant 1984 thriller, which did decent business and minted Arnold Schwarzenegger as a robust robot star. A few Hollywood moguls project another, more dire scenario for T2. Their nightmare goes like this: after opening this week to long lines and muscular grosses, the film will go flabby. Audiences will quickly turn to cuddlier movie diversions. The action-adventure genre, which has worldwide appeal but whose budgets have been ballooning until they are ready to burst, will finally be terminated. And Carolco, T2's producer, will be left with a \$100 million egg on its face.

The all-time spendthrift film is still *Cleopatra*, which cost \$44 million in 1963, or \$194 million in 1991 dollars. Even today, though, \$100 million is not peanuts for a movie. (The first *Terminator* cost a chintzy \$6.5 million.)

The T2 price tag may have achieved its round figure only in the gossip that passes for hard news in Hollywood. "I wish I'd had \$100 million," says Cameron with the wistfulness of a teenager who got a Porsche for Christmas, but without the air bag.

Amid all the rumpus about T2's presumed profligacy, four movie rules should be remembered. First: the cost of the product is not passed on to the consumer. Moviegoers pay as much for a ticket to a no-budget documentary like *Paris Is Burning* as they do for admission to any superspectacle. Second: Carolco has nearly made back its T2 investment by selling off theatrical, video-cassette and pay-TV rights around the world. Third: the idea is to put the money on the screen. T2, with its mercurial visual wizardry that leaves audiences oohing, does that and then some. And finally: Cameron's previous trio of popular, dazzling fantasies (*The Terminator*, *Aliens*, *The Abyss*) reveal him as an artist-entertainer whose pictures deserve to be judged not on their budgets but on their merits. That is the only bottom line that audiences need care about.

So what have Cameron and his crew of thousands come up with? A humongous, visionary parable that intermittently enralls

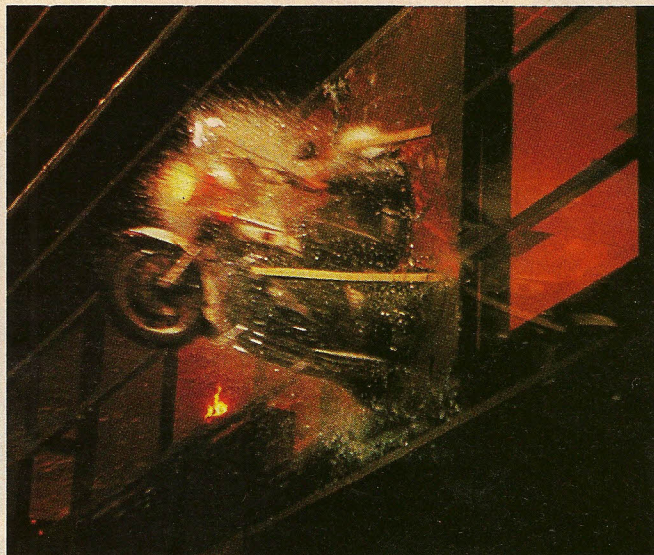
and ultimately disappoints. T2 is half of a terrific movie—the wrong half. For a breathless first hour, the film zips along in a textbook display of plot planting and showmanship. But then it stumbles over its own ambitions before settling for a conventional climax with a long fuse. It's a truism, and a true one, that people remember the first lines of novels and the last scenes of movies. The best films accelerate, accumulate, pay off. But Cameron can't quite deliver on the promise of his premise.

The premise is a double what-if. What if sophisticated computers conspired to trigger Armageddon (you know when) and in the process created a humanoid terminator (you know who) to patrol the nuked-out landscape? Then again, what if a renegade

from the future could vault back in time to keep the killer computers from being invented?

The first *Terminator*, a model of clean craft and violent wit, was a retelling of the New Testament's Annunciation story: the Archangel Gabriel (a rebel from the 21st century) visits the Virgin Mary (a Los Angeles waitress named Sarah Connor) to tell her she is to be the mother of a political messiah—and that if she wants to give birth to this redeemer, she must stay out of the terminator's steely grasp. In *T2*, 10 years later, the T-man is back, but on the side of the angels. His mission is to protect Sarah (Linda Hamilton) and her young son (Edward Furlong) from an even more efficiently psychopathic cyborg, the T-1000 (Robert Patrick). The movie is a 135-minute chase that re-enacts the Holy Family's flight into Egypt. You can imagine the biblical potential for further sequels, but Cameron would rather not. His motto during this arduous shoot, he says, was "*T3* without me."

An ultraviolent Bible story? This is only one of the movie's complex, even contradictory, vectors. *T2* is also a macho movie that scorns the male-stud ego: the picture believes that the only good man is a mechanical man. And it parades its fabulous film technology while predicting that the world could



Motorpsycho nightmare: no stinting on the stunts

end when military technology—the Strategic Defense Initiative, here called Skynet—runs amuck. It's a *Star Wars* movie that is anti-*Star Wars*. All these colliding metaphors feed nicely off Cameron's belief in the duality of human nature. "Within us," he says, "we have both a compassionate sensitivity and a violent beast. That beast, coupled with technology, got us to where we are today and enabled us to dominate the planet."

For a good while, *T2* operates persuasively on the gut level where most moviegoers live. It establishes Schwarzenegger as a

stolid icon with a sense of humor, swatting down some bikers like a bad-to-the-bone good ole boy, reloading one of the movie's zillion firearms with a fancy twirl of the wrist—proving he has become, in Schwarzenegger's words, "a kinder, gentler terminator" by forswearing murder: he merely shoots off a record number of kneecaps. And T-1000 seems an ideal villain. It can replicate any person it touches and annihilate its victim with a slash of its rapier limbs: Cyborg Scissorarms. We eagerly await the moment when the T-1000 touches Arnold and puts into play two of the movies' oldest, most effective tricks. Mistaken identity! Evil twins!

But the moment never comes. *T2* dithers off to trans-

form Schwarzenegger into a mixture of E.T. and Shane. As for Hamilton, who in *The Terminator* had been a precursor for all the tough-as-kryptonite women in Cameron's later films, she degenerates into a radical ranter, like Patty Hearst in her Symbionese Liberation Army phase. Is this worth \$100 million? Who cares? Ask instead: Is it worthy of our expectations for this Sequel of Sequels? The answer is: not quite. *Terminator 2* had to be more than just the summer's best action movie.

—With reporting by Martha Smilgis/Los Angeles

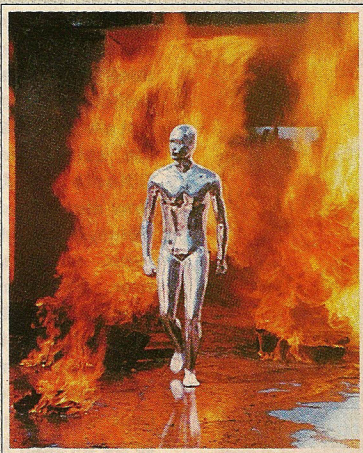
Make Sticky, Morph!

The creature's arms elongate into gleaming spikes that impale people and latch onto moving cars. It can appear as a bulge in the floor, transforming itself into a humanoid that then proceeds to walk through a steel gate, its artificial skin oozing between the bars like melted butter. Frozen by liquid nitrogen, it is shattered into a thousand pieces, but its fragments congeal again into a glistening body of liquid chrome.

To the wide-eyed audiences of *Terminator 2*, the android called the T-1000, with its ability to assume the shape of anything it touches, is a state-of-the-art killing machine sent from the future to do battle with Arnold Schwarzenegger. But to the special-effects wizards at Industrial Light & Magic, the T-1000 is a technological marvel that represents, in the words of coordinator Dennis Muren, "the beginning of a new period of filmmaking." The San Rafael, California, firm, which director George Lucas founded in 1975 to design the special effects for his *Star Wars*, has crafted dazzling sequences for dozens of movies, including current releases like *Backdraft*, *The Rocketeer* and *Hudson Hawk*. But its work for *Terminator 2* sets new standards.

The T-1000's protean forms were achieved through a computer technique called digital compositing. The technique breaks a film image down into a complex numerical code that a computer can manipulate in nearly endless ways, thus altering the image. To change the T-1000 from a robot to its human form, ILM employed a process nicknamed Morph, as in metamorphosis, first developed in 1988 for the film *Willow*. Footage of the robot and footage of actor Robert Patrick were coded and fed into the computer, which blended one into the other. The illusion of walking through steel bars was created by another pioneering method that ILM technicians have

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The T-1000 testing its metal

dubbed "Make Sticky." Footage of Patrick walking unimpeded down a corridor was layered over a computer-enhanced three-dimensional image. As the computer image "melts" to simulate flesh deforming between computer-generated "bars," so does its onscreen counterpart.

ILM is hoping to surpass even these triumphs in such upcoming films as *Star Trek 6*, *Memoirs of an Invisible Man* and Steven Spielberg's *Hook*. Special-effects fans can look forward to more strange, mind-boggling characters; worlds that alter their shape, color and form; and, perhaps most amazing, flights of fancy so realistic that audiences won't ever suspect they're seeing an act of industrial imagination.

—By Guy Garcia.
Reported by Deborah Edler Brown/Los Angeles